

CHAPTER 230

February 14, 2012

“S-Sorry about what happened. I just wanted to hand you the chocolate, but I panicked.”

Justin and Chie were at the beach at her request, despite it being pretty goddamned cold, and despite all they had heard the day prior about Marie... They had to leave that day since they had only reserved the lodge for a few days, which only made it even more awkward as to how they were supposed to go and rescue her now that they were so far from the television. Sure they could just go up the slope again, but no doubt there would be a lot of questions asked in regards to where they had been all day when they got home from the long trek up and back. They needed to figure something out, and that was weighing heavily on Justin’s mind. At least it had been until Chie had shakily tried to pass him a heart shaped box of chocolates while his eyes were focused on the incoming tide. She had a hard time holding onto it though with how nervous she was, and quickly lost her grip though, causing the box to plummet into the sand. Justin was needless to say shocked for a number of reasons. The first and foremost being that he had shamefully forgotten today was Valentine’s Day with all that had happened recently. The second was Chie was handing HIM a box of chocolates. Usually it was the other way around. He could almost feel his heart leap with deep gratitude for the kind, loving gesture; even if he was a little reluctant to eat anything from that box after it was coated in sand. He supposed though that it was wrapped, so the chocolate was in no danger of being covered in grains of sand. He smiled a bit as he leaned over to pick up the neatly wrapped box of chocolate. Usually these things were red or pink; he had never seen one wrapped in green. Chie made this alright.

“Aww, you shouldn’t have.” Justin blushed as he rotated the box to examine it more thoroughly. A green heart. And here he was under the impression Saint’s Patrick’s Day was still a month away. He wasn’t complaining by any means though, oh no. He would certainly prefer this to fancy gold or anything like that; there was more sentimental value in what she had put thought and care into than any shiny material you could find on the market. And no, that was not justification for Justin not getting her a gift. For the record, he found the most beautiful jewelry he could find her; the most perfect emerald in the center; almost as green as the clothes she wore... but... he didn’t have the money. He had them reserve it so he could make monthly payments, but on his budget, it was going to be a while. He wished he could just show Chie his bills for it, but one, he didn’t want her to take price into consideration, and two, she’d have to see it to believe it. He was only disappointed he couldn’t have it for Valanetine’s Day. Hell, at the rate he was making these

payments, he might not have them next Valentine's Day either. It was expensive as fuck. But it was worth it; she deserved the best.

"I couldn't make up my mind at first, so I decided to make it from scratch. That makes it more personal... I don't know how it tastes... but it's chocolate! I think..." Chie muttered to herself, index finger against her bottom lip as she tried to pick the best words. She wanted everything to seem perfect, but at the same point, she didn't want to raise expectations to something she couldn't meet. So she had a couple of these back and forths with herself in regards to her choice of gift. Justin grinned and shook his head. He had a good idea how it tasted if it was homemade.

"It could taste cow manure and I would still love it." Justin chuckled. In retrospect, it kind of made him sound like he enjoyed the taste of cow shit, but at the moment it just sounded right. And besides, Chie knew what he was trying to say. She would prefer if he DID enjoy the chocolate, but she was just happy enough that he liked what he had gotten, even on a sentimental level.

"Well that's good... because there's a good chance it does." Chie grimaced slightly, almost ashamed as she admitted her culinary skills weren't exactly top class. Not like Justin didn't know that already.

"I don't doubt it." Justin joked a bit, cautiously opening the wrapping paper as they sat down on the nearby stair case, eyes cast out to the sun reflecting off the ocean waves. It was a beautiful sight to be sure. You know what wasn't a beautiful sight? The contents of this box of chocolates. Oh the box was wrapped beautifully; almost PERFECTLY, godly even. The chocolate? Not so much. It was all misshapen, and the chocolate looked like it was melting already; even in this cold weather. It almost made Justin afraid to try one out. And that would have been a perfectly acceptable response given the taste as he popped one in his mouth. Bitter would be an understatement. Still it was better than her usual cooking skills, so he swallowed it and try to put a show on for his lover; it was the least he could do given the date and given he didn't have a gift to give her in turn. "Not bad."

"You think so?" Chie gushed with glee. Now that was not the response she had expected. Seemed that practice does make perfect. Hopefully that meant she was going to keep practicing until her food became at the very least edible. "It wouldn't harden, so I had trouble getting it into the shapes. I tried tempering the chocolate, but no matter how much water I put in, it just wouldn't mix..." Chie mused to herself. You know, Justin wasn't a chef either by any means, but he was pretty sure that was because you were supposed to use milk for that, not water. That's why it was called 'milk' chocolate. Oh well; it wasn't HORRIBLE, he supposed, so he couldn't complain. Chie started blushing pretty heavily after a few seconds though, as if she had just been hit by a sudden realization. "Was the heart shape too much? Th-That's not really like me, is it?"

"I thought it was cute." Justin smiled. Of course, in actuality he was thinking to himself if she meant the chocolate or the box, because if it were the former, well... uh... she did a pretty interesting rendition of the usual heart design. Maybe she was trying to go for a more realistic looking heart, in which case she might have hit it right on the head. But then, Justin doubted Chie even knew what a real heart looked like. She probably figured they really looked like their cartoonish depictions. Chie, never being one for compliments such as cute, perhaps fearing that deep down cute didn't really define her, blushed with great intensity.

"O-Oh... That's good. I'll make it a prettier heart shape next year!" Chie remarked with great determination, wrapping her arm around Justin's as she leaned her head against his shoulder. Well at least he knew she was taking about the chocolate now. It was nice to see Chie so determined about it, even if it was a little silly. Though I think the 'next year' part was the part that really got to Justin. She planned to stay with him that long, perhaps even longer, and that set Justin heart a flutter. Not that he had much doubt she would leave him, but it was always nice to have some reassurance. "You know, it still amazes me. You actually chose... me. I'm so... ordinary, compared to Yukiko, or Rise-chan, or Naoto-kun... Yet, you picked me. If this is a dream, I better not wake up!"

"Rise's too bubbly for me, Naoto's still kind of a bitch, not to mention stuck up. I guess Yukiko's alright, but I don't really like her like that. We just don't have that connection you and I have." Justin explained. Ordinary sometimes was a very good thing after all. It was perhaps because Chie was so ordinary that he loved her. She was his best friend, and because of that, she felt like someone who would always be there for Justin. It was hard to explain love, but part of it was friendship. And in that regard, Chie had outdone all the others by a longshot. "But you and me? You were always there for me Chie, through thick and thin. I couldn't imagine being with any other girl."

"I want to be a girl that you can brag about." Chie smiled, nuzzling her head into Justin's shoulder the way one would their pillow at night. Oh believe Justin, he wanted her to be a girl he could brag about too. But the thing was, it wasn't something she had to work at. He had never been prouder of anyone in his life than he had Chie. She was his pride and joy.

"Want to be? You already are." Justin joked as he pulled his arm from Chie's grip and snaked it wound her waist; tugging her closer to him so that they were nearly on top of each other. And for a moment, they just watched the beautiful shades of the sun setting in the horizon. What great timing for a romantic evening, huh? It was maybe a minute or so before Justin turned his eyes back down to Chie, her eyes closed as she leaned against Justin, as if she were trying to take a nap. In truth, she was just so comfortable in his arms that she could drift away at any moment. "Hey, Chie?"

“Yeah?”

“Could you tell me if I have any chocolate on my lips?” Chie opened her eyes to stare at Justin, a playful grin on her face as she shook her head with slight disbelief. It seemed boys would be boys.

“With pleasure.”

“Detention for not owning a textbook. Assholes.”

Maya muttered to herself in anger as she slammed her locker closed. While it was true she got free schooling, it was not true that she got free textbooks, and as a result, she had to share with Justin or Yosuke when need be. You would think given her financial situation her teachers would be more understanding, but they just didn’t give a fuck. They gave her detention on Valentine’s Day for not being prepared for class. Disgusting to say the least, but there was nothing she could do about it except sit there and suck it up. She wasn’t sure what was worse, getting detention today of all days or the fact that it was Valentine’s Day and yet Yosuke didn’t so much as say a word to her. Sometimes she had to wonder if that man even liked her. She loved him with all her heart, but time after time he seemed to shake her fate in him. He flirted with other women, he didn’t seem to acknowledge holidays such as this, hell, up until a week or so ago, Yosuke wouldn’t even hold her hand in public. But then, the latter was probably a safety thing when Justin seemed to be watching them all the time for some... inexplicable reason. He was kind of an ass truth be told. I don’t know, maybe she was just angry he didn’t ask her out today or anything. Wouldn’t be the first time she didn’t celebrate Valentine’s Day.

“...E-Excuse me...?” Maya’s eyes widened with slight surprise as she turned around to the figure of a teenager behind her. He had long reddish brown hair, about down to his shoulders, with bangs just across his forehead. His stance was rather timid, and the way he held his hands in his fingers suggested it was painful for him to present himself in front of the girl right now. Maya was needless to say very confused. She closed her locker as she curiously turned towards the young man. “H-Hi, my name’s Hikaru Tatsuko, I-I sit next to you in class...”

“Oh yeah, you do, don’t you.” Maya remarked before scratching at the side of her head a bit. They didn’t really interact during the school day, so she was needless to say curious as to what was making him just come up to her out of the blue. Maybe he needed to get some notes from class. Perhaps no one really talked to Maya because of her disability, but it was no secret she was a good note taker. He wouldn’t be the first to ask for a peak at her notes.

“Y-Yeah... Uh, listen... I was, uh... wondering if you weren’t busy if you’d... maybe like to go get a cup of coffee with me.” He questioned nervously. Maya had

assumed at first he meant to just talk or something, but then it really started to dawn on her that it WAS Valentine's Day. And she did have to wonder how he knew sign-language. Maybe he knew someone else like Maya? All the same, she couldn't help but blush. She got the implications pretty clearly. This was certainly out of the blue; she didn't even know this guy, yet he was asking her out on a date? No one even so much as batted an eye lash at her back home, yet here was this complete stranger trying for her affections it would seem. She had to wonder if it was just because being off the market made you more desirable and more valuable.

"Oh... That's really sweet of you, but I really can't." Maya admitted with embarrassment. She felt a combination of shame and flattery at the boy's offer. Unfortunately any and all sign of excitement in the boy's face disappeared within seconds. Rejecting people really wasn't Maya's forte; she really did feel bad having to tell this kid no. *"I'm sure you're a really nice guy, but I already have a boyfriend. I'm sorry."*

"Y-You mean that Yosuke kid, right?" The boy muttered with shock. He could put two and two together with the way those two passed notes all the time in class. Perhaps he was just hoping that it was all a misunderstanding and the girl that sat next to him in class was still available. Maya nodded with confirmation, a gentle smile on her face though an apologetic look to her eyes. "Wh-why would you want to date a kid like that? He's a total asshat." He growled with frustration. It seemed the only problem here had been timing. He was so close and yet the only thing standing between him was that Hanamura kid? That wasn't fair. He had to keep trying; he just had to keep his eyes on the prize. Maya frowned a bit with disappointment, eyes soon finding their way to the floor beneath him.

"...Sometimes." She sighed with disappointment. He really could be an ass some days; even if you knew he didn't mean it. Today was no exception unfortunately. She could almost feel her heart breaking as she went completely unnoticed this holiday. She had always wanted to celebrate Valentine's Day with someone and Yosuke had raised her hopes and crushed them in one foul swoop. So yes. He was an asshat. But he was an asshat she loved. *"Like I said, I'm sure you're really great, but I really can't. But you know..."* Maya paused for a moment before digging through her pockets and pulling out a pen, grabbing the young man's arm so that she could scribble something down. *"You should send me a text or something. We could hang out or something."* Maya smiled. That probably wasn't going to happen, but at the very least he seemed like a good kid, so she'd hate to just leave him with nothing. The kid stared at his arm with a combination of reverence and disappointment. Only hang out? But... *"Alright then, it was nice meeting you, but I have to go."*

"Wait!" The boy shouted before jabbing his arm out to grab her by the wrist, stopping her before she could leave. He kept encouraging himself that if he just aimed for the gold he would succeed. At the very least maybe she'd pity him and

grab some coffee with him. She just needed to give him a chance. Of course, the moment he lashed his arm out to grab her like that in desperation was the moment he lost any chance of winning her over. Her eyes widened with fear as he held on tightly to her skin.

"...Let go." She mouthed off, steaming with anger. She didn't know this kid, she didn't know what he was like or what his thinking process was, but one thing was for certain, no one put their hands on her. She only regretted giving him his number now. She tried to yank her wrist out of his grip, but it seemed his hand was wrapped to tightly around her bone for her to budge.

"P-Please, just give me a chance! I'm a really nice guy; really!" He begged with her, though his desperate pleading did little more than scare the ever living shit out of Maya. You don't just grab someone like that to scream in their face. She wasn't sure whether to feel bad for him or to be afraid by this point. Why not both, she supposed. No matter what, she disapproved. She'd be almost concerned if the boy wasn't interrupted by someone tapping on his shoulder. The moment he turned around to identify the source of the tapping on his shoulder, he was met by a fist to his face, knocking him back into the lockers and clean out on the floor.

"She said let go." Yosuke growled at the now downed young man. No one was going to put their hands on Maya like that and expect to get away with that. He was only happy he came around when he did; otherwise, he wasn't sure where that was going to go. "Are you alright? He didn't hurt you did he?" Yosuke questioned with great concern as he rushed over to Maya, who had been rubbing at her wrist now that she had gotten it loose from the boy.

"Yeah... thanks." Maya sighed with a combination of relief and anxiety. She didn't suspect something like that happening today of all days. It probably didn't help with how shy she had become around people ever since the accident with her voice. The one guy who understood what she was saying, and it turned out he was a huge creep and an asshole. It was like there was no hope for any meaningful interaction with other human beings for her. It broke her heart just a little. *"I'm just happy you came when you did."* Yosuke stared at her with concern for a moment longer before smiling.

"I would have been here sooner, but..." Yosuke slurred his words, clearly trying to extend his sentence as he pulled something out from beneath his back. Maya was immediately knocked off her feet by the beautiful sight of a bouquet of flowers in Yosuke's hands. The stems were slightly crushed from him balling his fists up with anger a moment earlier, but the pedals remained in place; a majesty of colors. Well... the ONE color. But what a beautiful color it was. "You know how hard it is to get a bouquet of these things?"

"Marigolds!" Maya lipped with great excitement, her heart skipping a beat as she reached out to grab them. The bouquet was almost bigger than her, so no doubt Yosuke had put a lot of effort into this. *"How'd you know?"*

"Well I always know little tidbits about you." Yosuke flirted ever so slightly; at least until Maya gave him that 'no seriously' look. She knew she never told Yosuke she liked marigolds. Why would she talk about flowers with him after all? She was pretty sure he wasn't exactly a fan of floral decoration. She wasn't entirely either, but she did have a soft spot for the golden tone of these flowers. "I heard it from a friend."

"...Justin told you?" Yosuke smiled and nodded a bit.

"Yep. But that doesn't matter." He smiled as he held out his arm, offering her the chance to hook her own arm around his. "Let's go get some coffee."